



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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Flashy new programs need time to mature

Several database programs with "artificial intelligence" features have been introduced in the last few weeks for use with the IBM PC and compatible small computers. Notably, **Paradox** from Ansa Corp. has gotten a lot of attention, mainly because it is backed by the same venture capitalists who have done so well with their investments in Lotus and Compaq Corp.

With big dollars backing its promotion — and with features not generally available with other high-end database programs — Paradox already is being touted as a future industry leader by some computer analysts.

But what's so special about programs like Paradox? And do they deserve your immediate attention?

In short, there is a great deal that is special about programs that successfully use "artificial intelligence" features. The programs actually "think ahead" and anticipate what you want to do based upon what you've done before. In theory, the longer you use such a program, the "smarter" it becomes.

In the case of Paradox (supposedly named for both its high power and ease-of-use — thus a paradox), it takes on a segment of the market that already is populated by some very capable and successful programs (dBASE II, Rbase 2000 and PowerBase, to name a few), and adds artificial intelligence (AI) features.

Difficult to implement

As you might expect, however, there are often large gaps between first, the programmers' good intentions and the actual operation of the finished product; and second, between the program's capability and the user's ability to implement it in day-to-day business activities.

With all the hype in the press over Paradox, some people are tempted to jump in quickly and try out the first release of the program,

despite its steep \$695 price. I would like to build a case for moving more slowly, particularly if you plan to use the program in a business environment.

Here's why:

- ✓ New programs have bugs. It takes literally thousands of new buyers — acting as unpaid guinea pigs — to discover all the bugs in a new database program. Then it takes six months (minimum) for the bugs to be fixed and for an updated version to be issued. Untold aggravation can be avoided by skipping the first release and waiting for the update.

- ✓ New programs need support. Especially in the case of complicated database programs, users depend on an elite group of consultants or in-house experts who thoroughly familiarize themselves with the program. With their knowledge and assistance, the implementation might take days compared to weeks or months if you went it alone. For this reason, it is a good idea to wait until this cadre of experts has accepted the new program.

- ✓ No need to rush. There already are at least 20 very good database programs offered for the IBM PC (out of more than 80 available). With such a variety, you can already find virtually any particular feature you're looking for in one of the existing products. True, all the fancy features might not be available in a single product, but you don't typically need them all anyway.

Success sells success

As with any new product, Paradox needs to prove itself in the marketplace. Dealer shelves are already littered with dozens of "better" programs that failed to catch on, and therefore failed to garner the support of independent consultants and in-house experts. Without this support, success is doubtful.

An example is the artificial intelligence product offered with Rbase 2000 called Clout. It offers a "front end" that drives the database with English-like commands, and actually lets the user define his or her own commands. I found it more trouble than it was worth, and have yet to recommend it to my clients.

The high-powered but difficult-to-use product that is the current best-seller is dBASE II (and the new version, dBASE III — \$695). This program was embraced by programmers for a variety of reasons, including its ability to "hide" its complexity from the user by customizing screen formats for particular applications. With thousands of experts supporting the program and developing applications with it, it has developed a momentum that keeps it a best seller — even though other programs are available that offer some more attractive features.

An excellent program I've recommended for users seeking to try their own hand at database development is PowerBase (\$349). It is perhaps the easiest-to-use and learn of all the high-end programs of this type. Already a big success with thousands of satisfied users, it is another "safe" choice.

THE BOTTOM LINE: As impressive as it sounds, Paradox needs to become widely accepted and debugged before being seriously considered for purchase by most business users. In the meantime, it deserves watching, because it just might become the next "standard" database program.

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